

TOP TEN BEST PRESIDENTS

Most of you have probably seen top ten lists like this before so most of the men on it should come as no big surprise. However, there might be a few surprises—not just in terms of who’s on it, but who’s not—causing you to find my rankings to be controversial, but then this is nothing if not an exercise in introspective observation. Of course, such a list is always going to be—at least some degree—subjective, though I have made an effort to curb my own biases as much as possible. It’s also important to remember that the role of the presidency has changed dramatically over the last couple of centuries, making what passes for a good president in the nineteenth century somewhat different than for one in the twentieth century. This naturally will skew the results, especially when comparing the two. I have also attempted to keep personal popularity out of the mix—some popular presidents were not particularly good presidents and vice versa—and concentrate on accomplishments in relation to the length of time they were in office and what the political and geo-economic situation was at the time. And so, without further ado, here is my list of the top eleven (we have a tie for number ten) men who have risen to the occasion and demonstrate that the presidency doesn’t have to destroy you if you know what you’re doing.



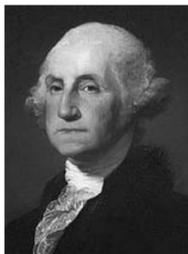
10. (Tie) GEORGE H.W. BUSH, 1989-1993:

An unpopular president when he left office, I still submit that few men did as much in such a short time in office as Bush the elder. Not only did he oversee the collapse of Communism and the Berlin Wall (effectively winning the Cold War without firing a shot), but he rid Panama of a crazy dictator (Manuel Noriega) and built an international coalition that oversaw one of the most lop-sided American military victories in history (Desert Storm). Yes, he was riding on the success of his predecessor to some extent and the economy did falter at the end of his term (and yes, he did break his promise about raising taxes), but overall, a pretty busy and successful four years that definitely should have earned him a second term.



10. (Tie) RICHARD NIXON, 1969-1974:

What? Tricky Dick makes my top ten list? Am I nuts? Maybe so, but put aside the man’s moral deficiencies and paranoia for a moment and you have one of the most decisive and intelligent presidents of the twentieth century. A first class Cold Warrior while serving as Eisenhower’s vice president, it was Nixon of all people who normalized relations with Red China, got us out of Vietnam, and kept the Soviets out of the Middle East when things heated up during the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. Okay, so he was about as exciting as cold toast and as popular as a root canal when he resigned in August of 1974, but this is a list based on accomplishments, not popularity. If you don’t like it, make your own list.



9. GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1789-1797:

So what is the “Father of our Country” doing way down here at number eight? I’m rating presidencies, not people, and from what I can gather, Washington’s eight years in the White House was unextraordinary. His greatest contributions to the nation had come on the battlefields of the American Revolution; by 1789 he was more a figurehead than a political mover and shaker. Of course, that was the whole idea. His job was simply to bring stability to the fledgling nation—still recovering from the war with England and finding its footing—and set the parameters of what a president was supposed to be and do, which he did most admirably.



8. WOODROW WILSON, 1913-1921:

The prune-faced Wilson normally ranks higher on most lists largely because of the League of Nations and other expansionist government programs he introduced during his eight years (the last couple of which were largely run by his wife while she hid his terminal illness from the country). There is no doubt he changed America considerably, but remember, this is the guy who sat on his hands for almost three years while Europeans slaughtered each other in the trenches of France, watched helplessly as Communists took over Russia, signed the Versailles Treaty which sowed the seeds for WWII, oversaw the introduction of prohibition and the income tax, and generally expanded the size of the federal government to heights undreamed of until the heady days of FDR. Oh, and did I mention the League of Nations proved to be a bust as well? Still, he was a mover and a shaker, and as that’s what this list is all about, he does belong on it.



7. ANDREW JACKSON, 1833-1841:

Alright, so he had a surly disposition, hated Indians, was big on slavery and the closest thing to a dictator the country has ever had, but few men defined the country’s direction in two terms than did ‘old Hickory. Certainly his military prowess and bravery was unequalled, and no president fought more duels than did the eighth president. A polarizing figure who dominated American politics in the 1820s and 1830s, his legacy is seen as mixed today, however, for while he was a fierce protector of popular democracy and individual liberty, marching the Cherokee nation out of the southeast (the infamous Trail of Tears episode) and his ardent support for slavery made him a scary fellow. I wouldn’t tell him that, of course; after all, he did win all of his duels.



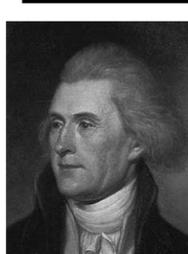
6. RONALD REAGAN, 1981-1989:

Probably no man did more to bring the country out of the economic doldrums of the seventies while forcing the Soviet Union into bankruptcy than did this one time Hollywood actor turned politician. While some of his foreign policy decisions left much to be desired (Lebanon, Iran contra to name two) it can fairly be said that no man did more to end the fifty year long Cold War than Ronnie the Red-Nosed Republican. Managing to joke while doctors remove a bullet from an assassination attempt also earn him a few points for coolness under fire—literally. All-in-all, a pretty fine president.



5. JAMES MADISON, 1809-1817:

So other than authoring the Bill of Rights and overseeing the Louisiana Purchase when he was Jefferson’s Secretary of State, what did he really do? Well, he was responsible for the first ten amendments to the Constitution that set up a system of checks and balances designed to protect individual rights from the tyranny of the majority, and successfully prosecuted a war with England in his second term, and then there was that war with the Barbary Pirates and a banking crises and...well, you get the idea. A very big little man.



4. THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1801-1809:

Okay, so if doubling the size of America (via the Louisiana Purchase, 1803) and opening the west to exploration (Lewis & Clark expedition, 1805) while president wasn’t enough, how about being the author of the Declaration of Independence, a philosopher, a scientist, and an enlightened intellectual who founded the University of Virginia work for you? Hard to beat a résumé like that. A political leader who insisted on limited Federal government, had he successfully prosecuted a major war during his two terms, he might be considered the best president of all time.



3. ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 1861-1865:

Old Abe usually makes it to number one on most lists like this, but I’m dropping him to number three for one reason: his inability to pick a decent commander for the Union army (Lincoln went through generals the way Liz Taylor goes through husbands), which resulted in the Civil War lasting longer than it should have. He also had a nasty tendency to suspend constitutional rights and his desire to free the slaves was more a political necessity than a genuine moral imperative. However, it can’t be denied that he held the country together when a lesser man would most likely have simply overseen its dissolution. In fact, it could be argued that it’s likely there wouldn’t even be a United States today—or at least one we would recognize—without his determination that the union remain intact at all costs, so for that alone he deserves to be so honored.

2. FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 1933-1945:



Some might be surprised to see FDR ranked ahead of Lincoln, but considering how much more dramatically FDR altered the political landscape than Lincoln did (of course, he had more time to do it: twelve years versus Lincoln’s 48 months) it makes sense if you think about it. Also, like Lincoln, he had to oversee the largest war in American history while trying to deal with the Great Depression. Did he solve the Great Depression? No. The war did that, but it couldn’t be denied that despite all his shenanigans—like trying to pack the supreme court and raising corporate tax rates to mind-boggling and job-killing heights—he provided steady leadership and a voice of reassurance at a time when things had gotten very dicey in the good ‘ol USA.



1. THEODORE ROOSEVELT, 1901-1909:

Most men found the job of president too big to handle; TR was one of the few who it might be said was too big for the job. Though criticized for being too much of a “progressive” by some on the right, it would be difficult to find a peacetime president who accomplished more in eight years while thoroughly enjoying every minute of it in the process. What can you say about a man who was a wealthy intellectual who also happened to be a competent historian as well as a real cowboy, a big game hunter, and an ardent conservationist? He also has the distinction of being the only president to win the Congressional Medal of Honor (for personally leading his rough riders up San Juan Hill in 1898) as well as for winning a Nobel Peace prize (for negotiating an end to the Russo-Japanese war in 1905). Perhaps TR’s biggest accomplishments were in taming some of the biggest monopolies of the day, improving working conditions for millions of Americans, improving health standards (he instituted the FDA) and setting aside millions of acres of land to be enjoyed by future generations through the National Park Service. But best president ever? If not, at least top three in my book.

BONUS TRIVIA FACT: *In the 220 years since Washington was sworn in as our first president, Republicans/Whigs have controlled the White House for 96 years, and Democrats/Democratic-Republicans for 112 years. In that time, there were ten wars; four beginning while Republicans were president and six which began while Democrats were president (with two of them being concluded under Republican presidents).*